DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 083 SP 030 447

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TITLE Transitions: Toward a Grounded Theory of What Happens between Lessons.
PUB DATE 24 Mar 88
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Classroom Techniques; *Course Organization; Elementary Secondary Education; *Lesson Plans; *Pacing; Teacher Behavior; Teaching Methods; *Time Management; Units of Study

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TRANSITIONS:
TOWARD A GROUNDED THEORY OF WHAT HAPPENS BETWEEN LESSONS

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March 24, 1988

SP030447

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TRANSITIONS:
TOWARD A GROUNDED THEORY OF WHAT HAPPENS BETWEEN LESSONS

Linda Dennie Webber

Abstract

Classroom lessons have a specific structure which guides patterns of interaction between teachers and students. The formal structure of the lesson is contrasted to the less formal structure of transitions: the times between the lessons. The informal structure of transitions allows an opportunity for different types of interaction which are discussed in the paper. Observations and interviews with two classroom teachers indicate that teachers are concerned about saving time and maintaining order during transitions. Teachers develop strategies to move their students efficiently and orderly from lesson to lesson. How teachers establish routines and expectations is discussed in terms of how this helps teachers meet their goal of teaching extensive amounts of academic information.

Transitions:
Toward a Grounded Theory of What Happens Between Lessons

Prologue

Students arrive at the classroom and busy themselves hanging up their coats, turning over their name tags which indicate they are present, talking with friends, and putting things away in their desks. When they finish organizing themselves, they gather on the rug, in front of the teacher who is sitting in a rocking chair. "Boys and girls, thank you for sitting down and getting all organized. It's time to listen and get our lunch count all done...." Another day at school has begun for this class of second graders. Across town in another second-third grade classroom, students are involved in very similar activites, preparing themselves for their day at school. After the tardy bell rings, the teacher says, "I need everyone to be sitting down and listening for just a short time...." For the remainder of the day in both of these classrooms, students will be a part of the lessons and activities organized by their teachers.

Introduction

The above description of the beginning of the school day for two separate classrooms is an actual account. To the casual observer, the ongoings in each classroom might seem like disorganized chaos. However, as Mitchell and Spady (1979) suggest, the extreme activity and "hustle-bustle" of the classroom is, for the most part, actually organized into meaningful patterns. One example of a "meaningful organized pattern" can be found in the form of a "lesson."

Lessons designed by teachers are organized for the purpose of

an exchange of academic information between teacher and student (Mehan, 1979). According to Mehan (1979), lessons can be characterized as a sequence of information and questions from the teacher with answers provided by the students. Although this description of Mehan's definition of lesson structure is oversimplified, it provides a base from which to begin thinking about contrasts in the ways in which times between lessons, called transitions, are structured.

Kounin (1970) has focused on transitions in his discussion of "movement management." Videotapes made by Kounin displayed an average of 33.2 major changes in academic-related activities in just the morning period in a classroom (Englander, 1986). In terms of classroom management, Kounin (1970) has suggested the importance of "maintaining the flow" of activity in the classroom. His discussion includes ways in which teachers impede a "flow" during change of activity in the classroom.

The account that follows is a description of how teachers and students interact during transitions, as well as a consideration of the structure of transitions, as observed in two elementary classrooms. The information can be taken as one way of extending our understanding of the interactions that occur during transitions in the classroom.

Method

The data for this study were gathered with qualitative methods (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Thus, the researcher was interested in examining the context and its role in the emergent patterns of interaction.

The data were gathered during a total of fifteen hours of classroom observation, as well as formal, open-ended interviews with two classroom teachers. Informal interviews were held with the two teachers, working in their respective classrooms, as the study progressed. All observations and interview information were recorded in detailed, handwritten field notes in the setting. Any thoughts or recollections that occurred outside of the setting were recorded separately.

Furthermore, a survey was administered to all teachers in a K-12, one-building school in a small, rural school district, as well. The survey focused on why the teachers used transitions, whether transitions were a concern, what they did to initiate transitions, what specific techniques they used to make transitions, and whether they had had specific training in this area. The survey was used to determine if the patterns emerging in the two classrooms were consistent with other teachers' experiences.

The analysis was made in terms of the patterns of interaction, considering teachers' goals and the context.

Classroom Happenings: The Role of Transitions

Although the two teachers work with different students in separate schools, both teachers have some similar comments about transitions. "Saving time" and making smooth transitions are important to these teachers. Working with twenty-four to thirty students in a class requires the teachers to develop strategies for making transitions. The teachers feel transitions should "ideally be a natural flow."

Understanding Routines

These classroom teachers expect that their students will develop an understanding of the established classroom routines. Establishing these classroom routines takes time and depends upon the makeup of the group of students and particular teacher, as evidenced by one teacher's comments:

> "Everyone does it different. It depends on your class. Some don't work into a routine very fast. You have to feel your group out a little bit."

> "[the students] come from three different teachers and all the other places so they're still in a training and listening process at this point" (The teacher is referring to the month of September).

These teachers also want their students to be able to respond to transitions with little guidance or direction:

> "Pretty soon I want them to know where to go if things aren't done" (that is, if a lesson is not over, but a change in activity is mandated by the schedule).

Although these teachers want their students to understand and respond to the established classroom routines, certain circumstances required specific reminders for the students. For example, when students were excused from a group activity to an individual activity which they had not done before, the teachers gave specific directions to students. In a lesson about pandas, the teacher gave specific directions about what students were to do once they returned to their seats. Before excusing individual students; that is, initiating a transition, the teacher had students repeat the directions so that students would know how to organize themselves during the transition. The specific directions were necessary because the students had not completed

such an activity in the past.

In contrast, the teachers gave very few verbal instructions for transitions during which students were making a change to a routine activity, such as recess or changes between reading groups. When students made such transitions, they knew what to do because they made these transitions daily.

Concerns about Wasting Time and Making Smooth Transitions

The teachers' concern about making smooth transitions is related to their concern about wasting time. If the teacher does not make a smooth transition, time will be wasted. If time is wasted, objectives will not be met and material will not be covered. Apparently, established routines help students make smooth transitions, which reduces teacher frustration. Wasting time is a source of frustration for these teachers:

> "I'm frustrated right now with this class. It's the fifth week of school and it's not going as smoothly as I feel it should. If it's not smooth then you really waste a lot of time."
>
> "My feeling for this year -- frustrated. It takes a long time to move from point A to point B and I'm anxious because I have so much to cover."
>
> "I always tell them ahead of time what they will be doing when we return. Otherwise we're losing a lot of time on task."

Techniques for initiating and carrying out transitions

These two teachers have developed their own set of techniques to help make transitions occur quickly and smoothly. The teachers have labels for students, so that students are aware of which group or groups are making a change in activity. The teachers have labels such as, "boys and girls, "people," "red group," or other specific names for established groups within the class. Students respond according to the label they have been given, whether that is a group name, "special number," or a color they are wearing:

> "Okay, what's the number today? Let's see if we can do this in forty seconds -- 21 through 26, 1 through 5, 7 through 10, 11 through 15, 15 through 20" (students line up in the order that their "special number" is called).
>
> "If you're wearing something that begins with j you may go. If you're wearing a shirt that has a picture on it. If you're wearing something with stripes. If you're wearing something purple. If you have on something that is white you can go to your seat."

Specific verbal cues from the teachers also indicate when a transition is occurring. Statements such as, "as soon as," "listen carefully," "okay," "eyes up here," are used by the teachers to inform students of a change in activity.

Teachers use many different techniques for making transitions between activities. As mentioned above, one teacher notes, "Everyone does it differently. It depends on your class." The same teacher cites examples of teachers who use puppets, songs, bells, point systems, or charts to initiate and carry out transitions.

Analytic Framework

Two considerations need to be understood before making an analysis of transitions in the two particular classrooms in which observations were made. First, classrooms can be thought of as "sub-cultural groups," functioning with shared understandings about interactions (Mitchell, et al., 1983). Secondly, lessons taught in classrooms are organized and carried out with a particular structure of interaction (Mehan, 1979).

Classrooms as "sub-cultural groups"

Although culture can be defined in many ways, for purposes here, culture will be defined as a system of shared meanings ("used to typify everyday events and activities) and collective projects (which guide intentions, plans, and actions)" (Mitchell, et al., 1983, p. 40). In a sense, then, classrooms have their own "culture," which guides the behaviors and expectations of students and teachers within the context of the classroom.

Classrooms are organized in such a way that the teachers and students are "engaged" in working together to give the classroom its sense of order. Mitchell, et al. (1983) suggest that school classrooms are "sub-cultural groups" which have established social norms and expectations, serving to guide the behavior of students and teachers. "Within each classroom, activities and events acquire an integrity and meaning which only experienced participants can fully grasp" (Mitchell, et al., 1983, p. 38). Mitchell, et al. (1983) also suggest that teachers and students both understand that school is a place for "special purposes" where participants must "learn to participate as members of an

emergent group with a unique meaning system" (Mitchell, et al., 1983, p. 38). Therefore, students must work toward understanding the routines, classroom rules, and guidelines for behavior in a social setting such as school provides.

Lesson Structure

According to Mehan (1979), certain characteristics make the activity students and teachers call "a lesson," distinctly different from other classroom activities. Lessons have a definite structure which make them different from other classroom activities (Mehan, 1979).

Mehan's explanation of lesson structure proposes that lessons are organized sequentially into opening, instructional, and closing phases. Each phase of the lesson serves a different purpose. The opening phase orients students and informs them that the lesson is going to take place, the instructional phase provides the exchange of academic information, and the closing phase prepares the students to move on to the next activity (Mehan, 1979).

Mehan (1979) also proposes that there are definite patterns of interaction during classroom lessons. The phases during the lessons are initiated by the teacher. That is, the teacher initiates the opening of the lesson, directs the instructional phase, and brings the lesson to a close. Whenever a teacher indicates some kind of direction to students, the students respond accordingly. Certain initiation acts by the teacher demand certain responses. For example, if the teacher tells students to get out pencils for the lesson, students get out

their pencils. Similarly, if the teacher proposes a question, the students will respond. If the students do not respond with an answer in accordance with the teacher's plan of direction, the teacher will continue with interaction until an appropriate response is elicited. Such a description of lessons demonstrates that they function with a definite structure.

The teacher's initiations during the opening, instructional, and closing phases of the lesson, which Mehan calls "boundary-marking work," create the organizational structure of the lesson (Mehan, 1979, p. 79). The presence of a structure that guides the "flow" of the lesson indicates that classroom interaction is a "rhythmic, cooperative activity" (Mehan, 1979, p. 79). Mehan emphasizes that students must be aware of the signals from the teacher, the rhythm of the conversation, and the timing of the lesson in order to function effectively as participants. Successful interaction is possible only when students and teachers "synchronize" the rhythm of speech and actions with each other (Mehan, 1979, p. 79). Such an assertion demonstrates the importance of a smooth rhythm for successful interactions in the classroom, especially in terms of classroom lessons.

The Analysis

Establishing Routines

Teachers work toward establishing routines in their classrooms so that students will understand what is expected of them. Mitchell, et al. (1973), emphasize the idea that only "experienced participants" of classroom activities can fully understand the classroom events. Without "shared understandings

of meanings," such as knowing what to do when the teacher says it's time for recess, students are at a loss of how to behave and what to expect.

In September, both teachers expressed frustration about their students' inability to move quickly from "point A to point B." Because the students and teachers are working toward developing a shared understanding of the routines in the classroom, classroom activities, including transitions, are not likely to be as "rhythmic and smooth" as teachers might like. Until the students and teachers understand the routines, the classroom activity is probably more chaotic than desired by the teacher. "That is why teachers must struggle anew each September to transform a relatively chaotic collection of disparate individual students into an authentic sub-cultural group" which understands the routines and guidelines which govern classroom interaction (Mitchell, et al., 1983, p. 39).

For the teacher who wants students to "know where to go if things aren't done," practice which includes mention of the appropriate behaviors will be necessary until students gain an understanding of the routines. The two teachers observed were working toward establishing this understanding of routines by giving students reminders about completing one lesson and moving on to a different activity:

> "If you're finished with Plan A and B, you're ready for recess. Stack your work neatly, push in your chairs, and line up."
>
> "It's recess. Before you go, make sure you have all of the scraps picked up."
>
> "Okay, you people who are here need to clean up because it's

time for recess."

"As soon as your desk is cleared you may line up for recess."

By providing specific directions, the teachers help students gain an understanding of the classroom routines involved in making transitions.

Beyond giving specific directions for transitions, the teachers work on establishing "appropriate behavior" during transitions. This seems especially important when the students are making a transition to an "exciting" event. On the way to a physical education class, one teacher reminds her students about the appropriate way to travel down the hall by saying, "Thank you for being so quiet. When we go, I want you to be just this quiet." When the students return from their P.E. class, the teacher uses the time of transition to reinforce appropriate classroom behavior by saying, "Thank you for going right to your desks and getting started. This table is quiet...and this table is quietly working."

Some transitions do not require any specific verbal direction from the teacher. Apparently, students know the routine well enough that specific direction is not necessary. For example, the teacher might state simply, "It's time for recess," with no further directions to the students. Students hear the announcement, organize their materials, and leave the classroom. Similar transition initation without direction is observable when one teacher changes reading groups. She simply says, "Plan B," and students know what to do. The routine is so well established that no further direction is necessary.

By establishing routines which students are working toward understanding and following, the teachers hope to decrease the amount of time spent in transition, as well as the need to give specific directions during transitions. However, until students are fully aware of appropriate behavior and the guidelines governing transitions, the teachers will have to provide guidance and expect some lack of "rhythm," or order, and "time wasting" during transitions.

The Structure of Transitions

Mehan's analysis of classroom lessons thoroughly demonstrates that lessons function with formal structural guidelines (Mehan, 1979). Teachers almost consistently initiate interaction during the opening, instructional, and closing phases of lessons. There are guidelines which allow the teacher to initiate and the students to respond. Rarely do the lessons deviate from these patterns.

In contrast, transitions are less structured. In both classrooms, transitions allow students to speak to each other, as well as informally approach the the teacher. Transitions between lessons are times when students talk to other students about the upcoming lesson or other topics. During one transition, the researcher observed a student playing with items in his desk, a student showing another student a new eraser, students talking to other students near them, students helping other students, and students organizing their materials. When a teacher indicates that the lesson or activity is about to begin, students stop these behaviors and begin following the structure of the lesson.

Certain transitions, such as transitions between lessons and recess or lunch, allow these two teachers to make individual student-teacher contacts. During transitions, the teachers check on certain students' progress, give compliments to students, answer questions related or unrelated to academics, or even exchange hugs or take time out to hold hands with students. The interactions do not seem to follow a particular structure.

Although transitions are structured differently than formal lessons, transitions provide an opportunity for the teaching of "informal lessons," as well. These "informal lessons" are taught without any formal planning by the teacher. One such lesson was taught when the second-third grade class was on its way to lunch one day. As the class made its way down the hall, one child's lunch pail fell open, spilling the contents. The teacher stopped the line of children in order to allow the child to retrieve her lunch. Some students laughed at the incident, while others helped pick up the lunch pail's contents from the floor. Before continuing to the lunchroom, the teacher used the incident to have a discussion about what it means to be helpful. The lesson required no materials or preparation, but here the transition provided an opportunity from which to learn.

Teacher concerns: Time and Order

One teacher's comment indicates the importance of transitions in terms of saving time: "It's the time on task thing. We need to get them moved the most efficiently. It all boils down to time and the efficient use of it." Teachers are expected to teach a substantial amount of academic material each year and

teaching this material requires efficiency in terms of time usage. Teachers cannot afford to waste time in between lessons. "If it's not smooth then you really waste a lot of time."

Related to the concern about wasting time is the desire for transitions to be made as smoothly as possible. If the teacherr cannot move students from one lesson to the next and maintain momentum, the "rhythm" of the classroom is lost. This concern is expressed by one teacher: "If it's not smooth, then you can have problems. Different classes go through them differently. Everyone has to cooperate."

Making smooth transitions is complicated by the number of students who will be moving about the room during a transition. A classroom filled with approximately twenty-four students is a full place, considering the relatively small area of space. One teacher talks about a technique which helps make transitions as orderly as possible: "If it's too noisy, they're out of whack. They need to be moved the most efficiently. First they have to be quiet to listen, and they can't all go in a group. I call colors, or vowels or consonants in names for them to line up. It helps the energy level stay under control." By using such a strategy to make a transition between lessons, the teacher exerts control over the order in the classroom.

Both of these teachers express concerns about taking too much time for transitions and maintaining order during transitions. Transitions are more loosely structured than lessons, providing opportunities for students to interact with the teacher or other students in informal ways. In contrast, lessons are structured

with specific patterns of interaction, mostly initiated by the teacher. The two teachers' concerns about wasting time and not making a smooth transition seem to be related to the structure of transitions. The less formal structure of transitions does not dictate patterns of interaction for students. Students may talk with students or approach the teacher, which may lead to an increased noise and energy level in the classroom. Although the teacher might use strategies, such as calling students to line up by colors, there is a potential for increased informal student interaction during transitions.

In an effort to bring order to their classrooms, making efficient use of their time; thus, increasing the time available for teaching academic information to students, these teachers develop strategies for making transitions. By promoting "time on task," these teachers are better able to meet their goal of teaching their academic information.

Toward a Grounded Theory

As previously mentioned, classroom lessons operate with a formal structure (Mehan, 1979) which dictates the patterns of interaction between students and teachers. A typical lesson occurs with order that is mandated by the teacher-led interaction. There is little room for "chaos" or unexpected events due to the formal structure of the lesson.

Conversely, times of transition in classrooms are fairly loose, informally structured events. There does not seem to be a "structure" that dictates the patterns of interaction during transitions between lessons. Interestingly, unexpected

"teachable moments" occur during these times, despite their informal structure. The patterns of interaction and types of interaction during transitions seem to be more flexible due to the informal structure. However, the informality of transitions also allows an opportunity for the "unexpected." Therefore, during transitions teachers are concerned about "chaos" and the potential of "wasting time" and not meeting academic goals. To help prevent potential "chaos" teachers devise strategies to make transitions occur as smoothly and quickly as possible.

Summary and Implications

Transitions provide teachers and students with the opportunity to interact informally with each other. Although the discussion here is limited to primary grade classrooms, the survey results also indicate that teachers through the high school level use transitions as a time to make informal contacts with students. Although teachers sometimes "fear" transitions because of the potential for "chaos," understanding the informal structure may help teachers accept the classroom conditions and encourage positive use of transition times, or help the teacher devise ways in which to create more structure during transitions.

Both of the classroom teachers interviewed said that they have had no formal training about initiating and carrying out transitions. Similarly, very few teachers responding to the survey report having had instruction about transitions in the classroom. If more information about transitions could be made available, one aspect of classroom life might be better understood.

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